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Toward Peace on Earth
We need code of conduct linking arms sales, human rights

By Jose Ramos-Horta

On Friday, the State of the World Forum will host a dialogue called "Should Great Crimes Against Humanity Be Forgiven?" The forum is a nonprofit, global educational organization that seeks to address the fundamental challenges facing humanity. Participants include Jose Ramos-Horta, who received the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize with Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo, for their work toward a just and peaceful solution to the conflict in East Timor.

As we prepare to enter the Third Millennium, each of us might wish to reflect on what has been the last hundred years of the history of mankind, on the extraordinary positive achievements in every level of human activity but also on the darker side of our humanity. Conferences such as the State of the World Forum, here in San Francisco, or Forum 2000, held in Prague last September at the initiative of President Vaclav Havel and Elie Wiesel, demonstrate this need of evaluation, of contemplation in a period of transition.

The geopolitics of our world have undergone tremendous changes. Nations have disappeared and new ones have emerged. The notion of "global village," born from the progress in transports and telecommunications, has made us even more interdependent and responsible for what happens around the world, as it becomes increasingly difficult to dismiss our responsibility by pleading ignorance. (Tyrants immune to international scrutiny only a decade ago are no longer safe. An event taking place in a remote village or Burma soon finds its way to the world through the air waves or the Internet.)

We must recognize that significant advances have been made in the past 50 years in the global struggle for human rights and the rule of law. The international community, through the United Nations and at a regional level, has developed an impressive mass of binding international legislation and protection mechanisms that had been unthinkable. Awareness about human rights is now much more widespread than ever and victims have learned how to make use of the existing international procedures for protection of human rights. For instance, the U.N. Human Rights Center in Geneva receives each year about 500,000 letters, reports, faxes and telegrams denouncing cases of human rights violations from every corner of the globe.

Even in Asia, our tortured corner of the world, unprecedented events are taking place. The peaceful overthrow of the dictatorship in South Korea is of enormous significance for democracy and rule of law in the entire region. For the first time in the history of Asia, former heads of states and other leaders are being prosecuted for their crimes while in office. The people of South Korea are challenging the sacrosanct myth of national security interest, which allows leaders to imprison, torture and murder with impunity.

Countries in all parts of the world, including Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica), Africa (South Africa, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Botswana), Asia (Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea) stand out as living proof that human rights are fundamental freedoms, rule of law and democracy are universal values, and that both go hand in hand with economic development.

But as I write, people are imprisoned arbitrarily and tortured by the Indonesian occupation troops in my homeland, East Timor; the victims of land mines must learn to live with their mutilated bodies in Angola or Bosnia; innocent villagers are butchered in their sleep and babies burnt alive in Algeria. Crimes occur in places far away from the peaceful and prosperous shores of the Western democracies, when in reality, these are the same countries which encourage them.

On May 29, I joined with 14 other past winners of the Nobel Peace Prize - including the Dalai Lama, Betty Williams and Elie Wiesel - to launch a campaign for an international code of conduct on arms transfers. This initiative adopted by the State of the World Forum is the brainchild of Oscar Arias, laureate of the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize. The code would require arms suppliers to certify that all arms recipients meet common-sense criteria, such as compliance with internationally recognized human rights and democracy standards, before transferring weapons. We have presented our idea at the European Union and United Nations, and we are encouraging all arms exporting countries of the world to adopt it.

Since the end of World War II, more than 20 million people in the developing world have died as a direct result of the sale of weapons from rich nations to less affluent nations. In August 1977, Indonesian air force pilots murdered my 21 year-old sister, Maria Ortencia, along with at least 20 children in a remote village in East Timor. My sister and these children were only a few of the more than 200,000 people that were killed in East Timor from December 1975, when Indonesia in- vaded and illegally annexed the newly independent land, to 1979. Indonesia waged this war, and continues to wage this war, using an arsenal of weapons imported from the United States and Europe.

Sadly, my homeland is not the only place where such repression and destruction takes place. In 1995, exports of "conventional" arms -- bombers, guns, armored personnel carriers and the like -- to the developing world totaled over $21 billion. The majority of these weapons were sold to undemocratic governments. The five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, who have been entrusted to guarantee peace and security in the world, who make the loudest rhetorical speeches about human rights, are also the ones whose arms manufacturers made most of the weapons that have caused most of the destruction of countries and peoples since the end of World War II, by arming unelected and abusive regimes.

Such transfers not only threaten the lives of innocent people in far off lands but also increasingly threaten U.S. and other peacekeeping troops. In several recent instances (Haiti and Somalia, for example) American arms were turned on U.S. forces. Arms exports to these governments were made in the context of the Cold War, but as Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a former speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan and a principal supporter of the code of conduct, recently said in Congress:

"The Cold War is over. It is time for us to have a new code of conduct that puts democracy and human rights ahead of a fast buck in selling weapons to the dictators around the world who repress people and violate the very principle which the country is supposed to be all about."

Land mines, torture equipment, cluster bombs, chemical weapons are weapons designed to inflict pain and death on human beings. Most victims are civilians, women and children. How can arms manufacturers, weapon designers, plant managers, politicians -- who have families of their own whom they love -- be so insensitive when it comes to the suffering of other human beings?

Human rights are not only a moral imperative. Human rights, fundamental freedoms and rule of law are also the only real guarantee of peace and stability that are so necessary for economic progress, for international trade and investments. Ultimately, a repressive regime that oppresses its people, denies the right of workers to form independent trade unions, suppresses academic freedom and freedom of expression, is not a reliable partner.